Greeks and Germans: Rethinking D.H. Lawrence's The Trespasser

FOR THE MOST PART, the critical reception of D.H. Lawrence's second novel, *The Trespasser* (1912), has not been kind. It is a book that has been largely been ignored or dismissed as part of Lawrence's juvenilia, of passing interest only as a precursor to his later writings.[1] But this attitude fails to overlook the book's potential value – certainly, *The Trespasser* has its artistic shortcomings, but these should be put to one side in order to examine the philosophical ideas that Lawrence is unfolding. The fault that distinguishes his early fiction is not so much the quality of the ideas, but rather a sense that Lawrence, as a developing author, has not yet found the right voice to express them. The first person narrator in *The White Peacock* (1912) allowed Lawrence to express himself more directly, but sacrificed the critical distance he

[1] As such, valuable research has mostly been done only around the edges of the novel: A.R. Atkins and Jacqueline Gouirand, for example, have looked into its textual influences, while Jane Heath focuses her attention on Helen Corke. Cecilia Björken is one of the very few critics to have approached *The Trespasser* on its own merits.

stillness, calm seas, redemption from themselves through art and knowledge, or intoxication, convulsions, anaesthesia, and madness. All romanticism in art and insight corresponds to the [...] needs of [...] [this] type, and that included (and includes) Schopenhauer as well as Richard Wagner, to name two most famous and pronounced romantics whom I *misunderstood* at that time" (Nietzsche, *Gay Science* 328). Rather than contradicting Nietzsche's overall project, therefore, Lawrence follows the continuing trajectory of Nietzsche's thought – in particular, his critique of romantic idealism – in *The Trespasser*.

Lawrence takes great care to reference key romantic elements in order to fit this critique. In the novel's opening scene, for instance, the affair with Siegmund is referred to retrospectively as "the tragedy" (46). The unhappy outcome of the affair is also foreshadowed throughout the novel, so that during Siegmund's journey to meet Helena he looks out of the train window and ponders: "How could it be Sunday! It was no time, it was Romance, going back to Tristan" (55). Siegmund's euphoric comparison of himself and Helena to these medieval predecessors, when seen as part of this overall critique, is full of subtextual irony. For Siegmund, the affair between Tristan and Iseult (which Wagner adapted into one of his most famous operas) is a measure of the surface intensity of his passion; the subtext of this allusion, however, is that Siegmund, from the very outset, surreptitiously draws a deeper satisfaction from the anticipation of tragedy, his yearning for an unhappy ending in which both lovers must die. This uncanny slip on Siegmund's part is thus indicative of the underlying nihilism of his character. His affirmation is all surface, all intellectual. His apparent vitality is a façade that conceals and masks a yearning for death. Lawrence nonetheless subverts Siegmund's prediction for, unlike Tristan and Iseult, both lovers in *The Trespasser* do not die. Set several months after Siegmund's death, the opening scene demonstrates that Helena, as the symbol of classical culture, is damaged but still alive.

Lawrence thus builds on an immanent disjunction in the philosophical trajectories of Siegmund (German) and Helena (Greek). The rationale for their affair is based on the mutual misconception that they share a sympathetic bond. Read at the symbolic level, therefore, Siegmund's attraction to Helena represents romanticism's ambivalent fascination with classical culture, particularly the Wagnerian appropriation of the tragic form. What makes ancient Greek culture desirable to the romantics is its Dionysian vitalism, a vitalism they wish to colonize and appropriate through a neo-Socratic process of rationalization. Behind a façade of extreme emotion, Wagner's lovers kill themselves not out of true passion, but instead induce their self-destruction through a kind of rational suicide. Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* thus betrays Nietzsche's early proclamation of Wagnerian opera as a revitalization of the Dionysian; instead, it allegorically reaffirms the calculated appropriation of Dionysian emotion by Socratic rationalism. Romanticism desires Greek vitalism, but only because, in the process of creating tragic emotion, it senses its own coldness, its own dearth of life. This gives romantic art a vampiric quality: initially attracted to classical culture by its sense of deficiency, Siegmund's (romanticism's) desire gradually mutates into a mixture of self-loathing, intellectual colonization, *ressentiment*, and, finally, death.

This separation between Greek and German thought is developed further through the contrast that Lawrence sets up between the classical conceptions of rhythm and circularity, and romantic ideas of eschatological finality. Lawrence uses recurring metaphors of cadence and rhythm to represent both the workings of nature and, by extension, their reflection in Helena's vitalist body. "He clasped her close, seeming to rock her with his strong panting. She felt his body lifting into her, and sinking away. It seemed to force a rhythm, a new pulse, in her" (84). Indeed, Helena is repeatedly linked to the rhythms of nature, in particular to the

changing tides of the sea. "The train crawled on, drawing near to the sea, for which Siegmund waited breathless. It was so like Helena, blue, beautiful, strong in its reserve" (55). But it is Siegmund, not Helena, who dominates the story, and thus it is his apocalyptic vision that impresses itself on the reader. Siegmund is a man divided against himself, a being torn between Socratic rationality and Dionysian emotion, and his downfall results from the programmatic triumph of the former over the latter. Lawrence explores this division, for example, in the scene where Siegmund swims onto a deserted beach.

> The sand was warm to his breast and his belly and his arms. It was like a great body he cleaved to. [...] "Surely," he said to himself, "it is like Helena," and he laid his hands again on the warm body of the shore, let them wander, discovering, gathering all the warmth, the softness, the strange wonder of smooth warm pebbles, then shrinking from the deep weight of cold his hand encountered as he burrowed under the surface, wrist-deep. In the end, he found the cold mystery of the deep sand also thrilling. He pushed in his hands again and deeper, enjoying the almost hurt of the dark, heavy coldness. For the sun and the white flower of the bay were breathing and kissing him dry, were holding him in their warm concave, like a bee in a flower, like himself on the bosom of Helena, and flowing like the warmth of her breath in his hair came the sunshine, breathing near and lovingly: yet, under all, was this deep mass of cold, that the softness and warmth merely floated upon. (88-9)

The warm earth is associated in this passage with Helena who, through this equation, comes to symbolize nature itself. The bay's inaccessibility – it can only be reached by a dedicated swimmer – limits the universality of Siegmund's comparison. His ideas may seem true for the limited microcosm of the virginal bay, implies

Lawrence, but they are cut off from the complex reality of the world. This division again echoes Lawrence's criticism of romantic nihilism, particularly in the way it presents an external display of Dionysian vitalism to the world (symbolized by the sun, which in Lawrence's cosmology represents the capacity for sympathy) while concealing a deeper, more fundamental coldness.

Another device that Lawrence uses to highlight the division between classical and romantic thought is the motif of the sunset. Back in London after his time with Helena, Siegmund has returned to the hostile company of his family. Lawrence writes these later scenes with an appropriate sense of impending doom. Siegmund wakes in the early morning, just before the sun has risen. "Siegmund sat up straight: his body was re-animated. He felt the pillow and the groove where he had lain. It was quite wet and clammy. There was a scent of sweat on the bed, not really unpleasant, but he wanted something fresh and cool" (200). Lawrence thus evokes the symbolism established earlier in the novel, when Siegmund associates the cold (represented by the wet sand) with his own sense of alienation and detachment. Touching his impression on the sheets serves to strengthen further these feelings of estrangement. Furthermore, this dawn has added significance for Siegmund, given that he kills himself later that same day.

> The day was pushing aside the boughs of darkness, hunting. The poor moon would be caught when the net was flung. Siegmund went out on the balcony to look at it. There it was like a poor white mouse, a half moon, crouching on the mound of its course. It would run nimbly over to the western slope, then it would be caught in the net, and the sun would laugh, like a great yellow cat, as it stalked behind playing with its prey, flashing out its bright paws. The moon, before making its last run, lay crouched palpitating. The sun crept

> forth, laughing to itself as it saw its prey could not escape. [...] The brief pink butterflies of sunrise and sunset rose up from the mown fields of darkness, and fluttered low in a cloud. Even in the west they flew in a narrow, rosy swarm. [...] As a wind, the light of day blew in from the east, puff after puff filling with whiteness the space which had been the night. Siegmund sat watching the last morning blowing in across the mown darkness, till the whole field of the world was exposed, till the moon was like a dead mouse which floats on water. (201)

Lawrence heralds the imminent, triumphant return of the sun, emblem of instinctive sympathy, as it ousts the alienating moon from the sky. But to Siegmund this battle is the ultimate defeat of his rationalism, a philosophical disaster from which he feels he cannot recover. The cold, the moon, the night: all his symbolic values are overturned by their disappearance. It is not alienation that destroys him, but rather the promise of a new, Dionysian intimacy. Like Tristan, Siegmund is overwhelmed by the power of the Dionysian instincts to the extent that, cut off from this satisfaction by his alienation, the only "rational" solution is suicide. Lawrence shows the sterility of this mode of thought: the outcome of this clash of Socratic and Dionysian in Siegmund's character is not artistic creation, but a shameful and pointless act of self-destruction.

Through Siegmund's eyes, therefore, Lawrence overturns the anticipated symbolism of the day's beginning and end. He uses an inverted pathetic fallacy, as it were, juxtaposing Siegmund's contemplation of death to the sun's movement over the horizon. The moment of triumph, the glorious emergence of the new self into the daylight, is savagely overturned by Siegmund's romantic sensibility. He describes the dawn as "brief pink butterflies of sunrise and sunset": to Siegmund these two moments have lost their usual distinction (201). This scene, furthermore, should be contrasted to Chapter 11, in which Helena experiences the sunset at the Isle of Wight from a very different perspective.

> Helena was reassured by the glamour of evening over ripe Sussex. She breathed the land now and then, while she watched the sky. The sunset was stately. The blue-eyed day with great limbs, having fought its victory and won, now mounted triumphant on its pyre, and with white arms uplifted took the flames, which leaped like blood about its feet. The day died nobly: so she thought. (164)

Lawrence again inverts the predictable use of the sunset as a symbol in this passage. For Siegmund, the dawn is a hunt in which the Dionysian sun (sympathy, instinct) chases down and devours the Socratic moon (alienation, reason). For Helena, by contrast, the Zarathustran *Untergang* of the sun is a moment of solemn (and yet ecstatic) celebration. The sun, having passed the *agon* of its daily passage, steps onto the sacrificial pyre with nobility, knowing, like Lawrence's phoenix, that it will rise again from the ashes of being. This Hellenic *amor fati* is in direct contrast to Siegmund's ignoble death.

Lawrence thus peppers the novel not only with images of death, but also a recurrent yearning for a rebirth of the classical spirit in romanticism. At one point, for instance, Siegmund says: "I like the sunshine on me, real and manifest and tangible. I feel like a seed that has been frozen for ages. I want to be bitten by the sunshine" (79). But Siegmund's attempts at rebirth, at germinating his metaphorical "seed," all end in inevitable failure. As he bathes in the sun, he can feel its Dionysian effects: "He knew that the sun was burning through him, and doing him harm. But he wanted the intoxication" (147). As Siegmund experiences during his visit to the virginal bay, this warmth is entirely external: it does not penetrate to the depths of his being. As Lawrence puts it in *Apocalypse* (1931): "What we lack is cosmic life, the sun in us, the moon in us. We can't get the sun in us by lying naked like pigs on a beach" (78). On the inside, Siegmund remains cold,

unsympathetic, calculating, and thus ultimately alienated from himself, from Helena, and from the world. Herein lies the core of Lawrence's critique: while idealism allows humanity to understand *intellectually* what it needs (as evidenced by Siegmund's correct diagnosis of the existential need for a change in his life), this rationally detached assessment robs humanity's will of the instinctive drive needed to carry out this requirement in an authentic (that is to say, sympathetic) manner. In *The Trespasser*, Siegmund becomes the romantic descendant of Kant's categorical imperative, able to diagnose correctly what he *should* do, but unable to effect a molecular *emotional* change in his own being. Just as the sun, as an external agent, cannot penetrate physically to the cold sand underneath the beach, so too it fails symbolically to effect a spiritual revolution in Siegmund. Instead of allowing him to experience the liberation of Dionysian release, the painful euphoria that Siegmund initially feels from the sun's rays is transformed into a mixture of nausea and insanity. "'I suppose this is the result of the sun; – a sort of sunstroke,' he said, realising an intolerable stiffness of his brain, a stunned condition in his head" (*Trespasser* 180). His affair with Helena, and the calculated statement of freedom it is supposed to represent, becomes nothing more than a romantic (and ultimately nihilist) posture.

The discourse of failed rebirth surrounding Siegmund culminates, however, not in this final disengagement, but at the novel's midpoint. In this crucial scene, the lovers have been sharing snatches of German poetry while night falls around them. As the moon rises in the eastern sky, Helena experiences a series of powerful emotions that culminates in a Dionysian feeling of unity with nature. "They are all still – gorse and the stars and the sea and the trees, are all kissing, Siegmund. [...] But they haven't you – and it all centres in you" (102). Helena's ecstasy alienates her from Siegmund, both in this verbal separation of his self from the earth's embrace, and in her own existential sensation of becoming-earth.

"I have been beyond life," affirms Helena, "I have been a little way into death" (103). A moment later, however, she intuits that Siegmund remains trapped, alienated within his own being and, in a moment of bad conscience, blames herself. "Suddenly she became aware that she must be slowly weighing down the life of Siegmund. [...] Her heart melted with sorrowful pity. [...] She put up her hands to her head and looked at the moon. "No more," said her heart, almost as if it sighed too: "No more!" (103). Siegmund appears to be physically affected by Helena's changing moods, lying on the ground and gasping for air.

> He was drawing in great heavy breaths. He lay still on his back, gazing up at her, and she stood motionless at his side, looking down at him. He felt stunned, half-conscious. Yet as he lay helplessly looking up at her, some other consciousness inside him murmured "Hawwa, – Eve–Mother!" She stood compassionate over him. Without touching him, she seemed to be yearning over him like a mother. Her compassion, her benignity, seemed so different from his little Helena. This woman tall and pale, drooping with the strength of her compassion, seemed stable, immortal, not a fragile human being, but a personification of the great motherhood of woman.
>
> "I am her child, too," he dreamed, as a child murmurs unconscious in sleep. He had never felt her eyes so much as now, in the darkness, when he looked only into deep shadow. She had never before so entered and gathered his plaintive masculine soul to the bosom of her nurture. (103)

In contrast to the youthful, nervous woman of twenty-six that Lawrence usually portrays her to be, Helena is transformed in this passage into an ancient, elemental force. She simultaneously fulfills and transcends the classical symbolism assigned to her by

Lawrence. As a force of nature, an instinctive being, she represents the deeper and more mysterious elements of the human being; but it is from this intimacy with humanity's animal being that Hellenic culture emerges, in Lawrence's eyes, as the pinnacle of human civilization. This affirmation is qualified, nonetheless, by a growing ambivalence within Helena's character, for despite the power of her instincts, she nonetheless shows an increasing tendency towards an adoption of Siegmund's nihilistic outlook. Helena's affair with Siegmund effects a decline in her character that parallels the decadence of Greek society in the post-Socratic era.

It is in this condition that the reader encounters Helena at the beginning of the novel: disillusioned, broken, and sick with Siegmund's idealism, as if she is bearing their stillborn child in the womb of her brain. Helena fights off this sickness instinctively, despite its nihilistic effects, and it is through the encouragement of one of Lawrence's thinly disguised mouthpieces, Cecil Byrne, that her recovery is presaged:

> "After all," said Byrne, when the door was closed. "If you're alive you've got to live."
>
> Helena burst into a titter of amusement at this sudden remark.
>
> "Wherefore?" she asked indulgently.
>
> "Because there's no such thing as passive existence," he replied, grinning.
>
> She curled her lip in amused indulgence of this very young man.
>
> "I don't see it at all," she said.
>
> "You can't," he protested, "any more than a tree can help budding in April – it can't help itself, if it's alive; same with you."
>
> [...]
>
> "You want March," he said – he worried endlessly over her – "to rip off your old leaves. I s'll have to be March," he laughed. (45)

Cecil prophesies Helena's recovery, not through any process of "thinking through" or external logic, but through an instinctive renewal, one that is as natural to her as the change of the seasons.

Whereas Wagner creates musical discord in order to represent a disruption of the social order, an instability that builds to a narrative climax that is relieved by the eventual harmony of both plot and music, Lawrence thus takes the unusual step of placing the novel's thematic climax at the beginning of his text. Subverting the romantic, Wagnerian conclusion towards which he seems to be heading, Lawrence hints that this culmination will not come, that the novel will end on an anticlimactic note. "'There will be an end to this,' said Helena, communing with herself. 'And when we come out of the mist-curtain, what will it be. No matter – let come what will. All along, Fate has been resolving, from the beginning, resolving obvious discords, gradually, by unfamiliar progressions; and out of original combinations weaving wondrous harmonies with our lives. Really, the working out has been wondrous, is wondrous, now. The Master-Fate is too great an artist to suffer an anti-climax. I am sure the Master Musician is too great an artist to allow a bathetic anti-climax" (121). The feeling of dissatisfaction upon reaching the novel's conclusion is caused by this deliberate act of sabotage on Lawrence's part. In the disjunction between the sympathetic and the intellectual, the Greeks and the Germans, Lawrence relentlessly unveils the fault line that separates classical from romantic tragedy. Lawrence offers *The Trespasser* to his readers as a crumpled sacrifice, a monument to the failure of modernity: a metaphysical failure that is best expressed in his artistic one.

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